

Watson, Charles Henry (1877–1962)

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Milton Hook, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, the United States). Hook retired in 1997 as a minister in the Greater Sydney Conference, Australia. An Australian by birth Hook has served the Church as a teacher at the elementary, academy and college levels, a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and as a local church pastor. In retirement he is a conjoint senior lecturer at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored *Flames Over Battle Creek*, *Avondale: Experiment on the Dora*, *Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian, Gospel Revivalist* the *Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series*, and many magazine articles. He is married to Noeleen and has two sons and three grandchildren.

Charles Henry Watson was a businessman who became a Seventh-day Adventist pastor. Quickly demonstrating an aptitude for management and leadership, he was ordained within a year of graduating from the Australasian Missionary College, and elected as a conference president very shortly thereafter. He was later elected as the president of the Australasian Union Conference and is to this date the only Australian to be elected as the president of the General Conference. His term of service in that position was the Depression years of 1930–1936.

Early Experience

Charles Henry Watson was born on October 8, 1877, to Henry and Sarah (Pettingill) Watson, who were living in the farming district that formed the hinterland to Port Fairy and Yambuk on the south coast of Victoria, Australia.¹ He was raised an Anglican. In his district church, St. Peters, Yambuk, he married his neighbor and childhood friend, Elizabeth Mary Shanks on March 23, 1898.² Elizabeth was born in the same district on December 8, 1875, to Thomas and Elizabeth (Harper) Shanks.³



Charles Henry Watson

Photo courtesy of Adventist Heritage Centre, Australia.

Charles trained as a wool classer and developed his own business as a buyer of baled wool for the knitting mills. Charles and Elizabeth accepted the Seventh-day Adventist faith in 1902. The following year they attended the Royal Park camp meeting in Melbourne and were impressed with the preaching of Robert Hare. Charles began to think of becoming a preacher himself. For that reason he sold his business and in 1907 took his young family to Cooranbong, NSW, where he enrolled at the Avondale School for Christian Workers (ASCW) to take some biblical studies. He did some practical ministry at nearby Maitland in 1909. When he heard that Robert Hare was appointed to teach Bible subjects in 1910 at ASCW, he hurried back with his family to renew his studies.⁴ Hare was noted for his published poems. Charles, imitating his hero, published one of his own in the church periodical during his student days.⁵ In 1911 he graduated from the missionary course.⁶ His years at study were austere ones, having sold a comfortable home in Victoria to finance the support of his family while they lived in a humble cottage at Cooranbong.⁷

A Career Fast-tracked

Charles was 34 when he graduated, and therefore had some maturity in his favour. Nevertheless, his advancement to positions of responsibility were nothing short of sensational. After his graduation he was appointed to assist with evangelism in the Victorian Conference, and within a few months he was ordained at the Windsor church, September 14, 1912. Just prior to that event the Australasian Union Conference (AUC) had appointed him to be president of the Queensland Conference.⁸ The haste was unprecedented. Two days after his ordination he and his family were travelling north to arrive at the Queensland Conference session. His presidency was a *fait accompli*, but the delegates nevertheless followed protocol with an election.⁹

Two years after his appointment, at the ninth AUC session in Sydney, September 15–27, 1914, Charles presented his report of activities within the Queensland Conference. It was a comprehensive analysis of the statistics and finances, demonstrating that he had quickly grasped the administrative conventions.¹⁰ During the meetings he was elected to Australasian headquarters as vice president of the AUC. The office carried a number of *ex officio* positions, such as membership of the boards of the Sydney Sanitarium, the Australasian Missionary College, and the Financial Advisory Committee.¹¹ Within 12 months he was elected president of the AUC.¹² He was only four years out of college.

Formerly the Southeast Asian region was the responsibility of the AUC, but in 1912 it was transferred to the Asiatic Division, enabling the AUC to divert funds to South Pacific missions. As president of the AUC Charles directed a proliferation of mission stations and schools that trained numerous national leaders, especially in the pioneering stages of the western South Pacific. His first personal contact with the General Conference was his attendance at the March/April 1918 session in San Francisco, where he was the only Australasian delegate.¹³ It was a significant learning experience for him as he mingled with many administrators of long standing.

At the 1922 General Conference session, once again in San Francisco, Charles, as president of the AUC, led a group of five other Australasian delegates.¹⁴ He provided an excellent report of progress within his territory.¹⁵ He also addressed the assembly on the Sunday evening, May 14, delivering a sermon titled “The Threefold Message,” a lengthy discourse based on Revelation 14:6, 7 that was peppered with illustrations from the mission fields of Fiji, Solomon Islands, and New Hebrides (now Vanuatu).¹⁶ His term as AUC president was impressive, prompting his election as associate treasurer of the General Conference and chief among nine vice presidents to assist the president, William Spicer.¹⁷ He was also elected to the Board of Trustees of the General Conference Association, the headquarters’ legal entity.¹⁸

First Term of Service in America

Prior to taking up his new assignment at the General Conference, Charles returned to Australia to organize the transfer of his family to Washington, D.C. Twenty-three-year-old Beatrice, who married Ernest Lemke, remained behind in Australia, but the rest of the family, including wife Elizabeth, sons Wilfred and Cyril, and daughter Phyllis and son-in-law Reginald Duffy, all sailed from Sydney aboard the *Tahiti* on October 12, 1922.¹⁹ Charles’s favorite preacher and former Bible teacher, Robert Hare, published a poem for the occasion, assuming it would be the last time he would see Charles before heaven.²⁰

The office of chief, or general, among vice presidents at the General Conference was a new one, its duties described as “general field work throughout the world.”²¹ It involved much travel, and even though his family had settled at Washington, they saw little of him. He acquitted himself well and earned the respect of his associates. Four years later, at the 1926 General Conference session in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, he was once again asked to address the assembled delegates. He opened his sermon with Psalm 47:9 and proceeded to rehearse the history of the SDA Church.²² However, all was not well within his own house. No details were aired, but Spicer simply shared with the delegates the news that Charles “found it necessary to return to Australia” and prayed that God would “send healing and deliverance” to the family. “Our hope,” Spicer continued as he took Watson’s hand on stage, “[is] that someday you will be back with us again.”²³ There were no imminent deaths among family members left in Australia. The urgency to return was more likely stress being experienced by Charles himself.

Back in Australia

The Watson family sailed back to Sydney on the *Makura*, reaching Sydney on September 4, 1926.²⁴ Charles was appointed to resume the presidency of the AUC, a position he held for three more years.²⁵ It was during this time that he expressed a deep conviction that had grown as he toiled in ministry. He wrote, “Christ teaches that in the daily sacrifice of unrecorded and unapplauded ministry life reaches its truest joy.”²⁶ This principle seemed to encapsulate his motivation and demonstrated that he was a man at peace with his earlier resolve to abandon

his commercial business and be a preacher like Robert Hare.

Second Term of Service in America

Charles attended the May/June 1930 General Conference session in San Francisco, giving his report of activities in the Australasian homelands and mission fields.²⁷ It was a good report, but it was not its excellence that won him the highest accolades. His personal performance earlier, during his time as Spicer's right-hand man, had already made him the natural choice to be Spicer's successor. Spicer had warmly farewelled him in 1926 and was there to welcome him back in the opening meeting of the 1930 session and asked Charles to announce the first hymn.²⁸ In the first session of the nominating committee Charles was elected as the General Conference president to succeed Spicer.²⁹ Charles preached in one of the Bible study hours during the session. He titled it "The Just Shall Live by Faith." It was a moving discourse explaining the gospel from the book of Job.³⁰

Charles was the only Australian to be voted as the General Conference president. His term, 1930 through 1936, was arguably the most difficult period because of the Great Depression years. Funds deteriorated to such an extent that the next General Conference session, due in 1934, was postponed until 1936, when conditions looked brighter. In his 1936 world report Charles spoke of the Depression as "a veritable Red Sea of financial difficulty." Annual income slumped by millions of dollars. Not until 1935 did the situation begin to improve. He was pleased to say that they had not borrowed money but had, instead, made drastic reductions with expenditure and allocations. Other statistics were more favorable. For example, during 1930 through 1934 world membership rose by ninety thousand individuals, one thousand new churches were built, and mission stations were established in 184 new countries and islands.³¹

The six years of intensive administrative duties forced Charles to request a lighter load, because his health was once again beginning to show the strain. He was appointed back to Australia.³²

A Lighter Assignment of Sorts

In late 1936 Charles assumed the chair of the AUC for the third time. The office of presidency carried the dual role as the representative of the Australasian field at the General Conference, in effect as one of the vicepresidents of the General Conference. Visits back to America were required in order to attend some of the executive committee meetings. The workload had therefore only been lightened moderately. He relinquished the office of president in 1938, but because his experience at world headquarters was so valued he was persuaded to retain his vicepresidency of the General Conference, representing Australasian interests until 1944, when he retired.³³

A Dignified Demise

Charles and Elizabeth retired to a home in Turramurra, near the AUC headquarters in Sydney. Often his counsel was sought by administrators who had learned to value his business acumen and skillful handling of difficult church matters. He enjoyed growing roses in his later years and enjoyed good health until almost the last, when he passed away in the Sydney Sanitarium and Hospital on Christmas Eve 1962. A service was held in the nearby Wahroonga church,³⁴ and he was laid to rest in the Northern Suburbs Memorial Gardens, North Ryde, suburban Sydney. Elizabeth had not enjoyed good health and was bedridden at the time of his death. A few months later, on May 16, 1963, she too passed away and was laid to rest with Charles after a similar service in the Wahroonga church. They were survived by their four children, five grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren.³⁵

A lasting memorial to Charles Watson was initiated with the naming of Watson Hall, the newly built men's dormitory at his Alma Mater, now called Avondale College.³⁶

*And when from the throne of glory bright,
The voice of the Savior sounds,
When the morn shall break that ends the night,
And death no more be found;
All tears removed by His gentle hand,
He'll lead us through the glorious land,
And on that blessed, blissful shore,
Will bid us rest for evermore.*

Adapted from C. H. Watson, "Rest"³⁷

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